



Background Brief

The role of social protection programs in shaping the future of the Bangladesh food system

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1 Key messages

01

Since its independence, Bangladesh has shown steadfast commitment to developing social protection measures aimed at poverty reduction, healthcare, education, and employment challenges.

02

Events such as the COVID-19 pandemic have underscored the need for comprehensive social protection which integrates food systems, disaster risk reduction, and climate change adaptation.

03

Social protection programs, such as cash transfers, school feeding, and public works, have mitigated chronic food insecurity by stabilizing incomes and supporting livelihoods.

04

The effectiveness of social protection programs is limited by key challenges including administrative inefficiencies, the mis-targeting of support, funding constraints, corruption, and accessibility issues.

05

Future uncertainties, including political stability, economic growth, demographic changes, climate risks, and technological advancements, could impact the sustainability and effectiveness of social protection programs.

06

International organizations and donor agencies can help fill resource gaps and provide technical and financial support, particularly in weaker economic and governance conditions.

07

The paper recommends expanding and enhancing programs, cultivating innovation, building resilience, improving governance structures, and fostering community-based solutions for a more effective social protection system.

1 Introduction to social protection programs in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, social protection programs play a crucial role in reducing poverty, inequality, and social exclusion by providing financial support, improving livelihoods, and offering social security to the poorest and most vulnerable populations. Additionally, social protection acts as a key government investment that supports economic growth, and these programs also play a role in strengthening disaster prevention and mitigation strategies.

The country's government, in partnership with international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), has been expanding social protection programs to promote inclusive development and social welfare.

2.1 Current social protection programs

As of the 2023–24 fiscal year, Bangladesh has **115 social protection programs**, implemented by **39 ministries**, with a budget of **BDT 1,262 billion** (16.58% of the national budget, 2.52% of gross domestic product (GDP)). These programs are grouped into five thematic categories:



Social allowances: Includes old age allowances, agricultural subsidies, and support for people with disabilities.



Food security and disaster assistance: Examples include the Vulnerable Women Development Program, which provides women with monthly rations of fortified rice and skills development training; General Relief Operations; Open Market Sales, a scheme designed to increase supply of and access to grains, particularly for the poor; and the Food Friendly Program, which offers poor rural households rice subsidized rice provisions during the lean season.



Labor/livelihood interventions: Key programs include the Employment Generation Program for the Poor (EGPP), which offers able-bodied and unemployed individuals 80 days' of work during the lean period; the Vulnerable Group Feeding Program for Fishermen, providing fishermen with rice supplies during times of fishing bans; and Tottho Apa, which empowers women through information and communication technologies.



Social insurance: Focuses on pension schemes and national savings programs.



Human development and social empowerment: Prioritizes primary education, such as stipends for students and free textbook distribution.



Image credit: IFAD/GMB Akash

An approach of note is the first **National Social Security Strategy (NSSS)**, introduced by the Government of Bangladesh with support from development partners in 2015. Established to address underperformance in the country's social protection system, the NSSS aims to ensure a more efficient use of resources, strengthen delivery systems, and create a more inclusive social security system.

2.2 Life-cycle approach

Bangladesh's social protection system follows a **life-cycle approach**, addressing the different risks people face throughout their lives. This ensures support during various life stages and challenges, including:



Childhood: Reducing risks such as stunting from undernutrition



Working age: Managing challenges including job loss and workplace accidents



Old age: Supporting issues related to poor health or disability



Covariate shocks: Adverse events affecting a large portion of the population, such as pandemics and economic crises

Table 1 provides an overview of the distribution of social protection programs, beneficiaries, and budget allocation across these life stages. It highlights how resources are allocated to specific demographic groups to address their unique vulnerabilities and ensure long-term social security.

Table 1: Distribution of programmes, number of beneficiaries, and budget allocation, based on life-cycle, in 2023-24

Life-cycle	Programs	No. of beneficiaries (million)	Budget (million BDT)
Pregnancy and childhood	6	331.681	7,794.8
School-aged children	12	515.533	2,534.2
Working age and youth	40	3813.747	5,275.6
Old age	6	3756.484	682.5
Covariate shocks	51	4209.770	26,417.3

3 Evidence of effectiveness of social protection programs

Evidence from various studies demonstrates that social protection programs in Bangladesh are effective in addressing poverty, food security, livelihoods, and social inclusion among vulnerable populations. However, continued monitoring and improvements are essential to sustain and expand their influence.

Below are key research findings on the impacts of these programs:

- **Poverty alleviation:** Chakarvarti (2022) highlighted the ability of social protection programs to significantly reduce poverty levels and improve financial stability, particularly among the most vulnerable.
- **Improving food security and nutrition:** A study by the International Food Policy Research Institute's (IFPRI) Transfer Modality Research Initiative (Ahmed et al., 2021) showed that combining cash transfers with nutrition education greatly enhances household food security and child nutrition, with lasting effects over time.
- **Employment support:** The EGPP proved effective in reducing seasonal poverty. By providing temporary jobs during lean periods, participants experience better income levels and food security (Ahmed et al., 2019).
- **Cash transfers:** Programs such as the Old Age Allowance, Widow Allowance, and Disability Allowance helped beneficiaries improve their financial security. Kabeer et al. (2010) confirmed a significant impact on poverty reduction among those assisted by these programs.
- **Agricultural support:** Government assistance to farmers, such as through the Aus Rice Production Program, has improved food security and increased farmers' income. Uddin and Dhar (2018) found that farmers who received input support experienced overall socio-economic improvements.
- **Food-for-work:** This program contributed to better food security by providing food in exchange for labor on community projects. Participants reported higher food consumption and better nutrition (Rahman and Choudhury, 2012).
- **Vulnerable Group Development (VGD):** Targeting ultra-poor women, the VGD program significantly improved food security and nutrition, with participants seeing gains in calorie intake and dietary diversity (Ahmed et al., 2009).
- **Skills development for youth:** The Skills for Employment Investment Program enhanced youth employability through vocational training. A World Bank report (2018) found that SEIP graduates had higher employment rates and income compared to non-participants.

With its focus on marginalized groups, the NSSS helps broaden the reach of these programs by supporting a more inclusive social protection system. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2017), NSSS has contributed to reducing inequality and increased coverage of social protection systems.

4 Challenges facing social protection programs

Despite adopting the NSSS in 2015, Bangladesh still faces several challenges in the implementation of its social protection programs:



Administrative inefficiencies: Fragmented social protection systems and overlapping responsibilities among ministries reduce efficiency. Bureaucratic complexities and a lack of coordination between government agencies hinder the smooth implementation of programs (World Bank, 2013).



Mis-targeting: Errors in targeting support – such as excluding eligible beneficiaries or including ineligible ones – remain a significant challenge, due to inadequate data and ineffective mechanisms (Rahman et al., 2014). Ensuring that support reaches the most vulnerable people is difficult without proper targeting systems.



Funding constraints: Limited financial resources and reliance on donor funding threaten the sustainability and scalability of social protection programs. Budget constraints also reduce the coverage and impact of these schemes (ILO, 2017).



Corruption and political influence: Corruption distorts the distribution of benefits, reducing the effectiveness of social protection programs. Political interference further undermines the fair allocation of resources (TIB, 2018).



Lack of awareness and accessibility: Many potential beneficiaries are unaware of available social protection programs, or face difficulties accessing them due to geographic barriers and complex administrative processes. This is especially prevalent in rural areas (IFPRI, 2017).

Despite having more work to do in these areas, there have been some recent notable reforms – including the integration of digital payment systems (G2P), the creation of a single registry for social protection beneficiaries, and the development of a dedicated social protection website. These initiatives aim to enhance coordination, transparency, and data protection.

Pilot initiatives are also underway, focusing on old age support, disability services, and improved management information systems. Continued reforms in these areas are crucial to overcoming the challenges faced by Bangladesh's social protection programs.

By focusing on administrative efficiency, accurate targeting, sustainable funding, transparency, and accessibility, Bangladesh can strengthen its social protection initiatives, ensuring better outcomes for its most vulnerable populations.

Key uncertainties in the future of social protection programs in Bangladesh

The future of social protection programs in Bangladesh is shaped by several uncertainties that could significantly impact their effectiveness and sustainability. These uncertainties stem from political, economic, social, and environmental factors, which are critical considerations in long-term planning.

Political stability and governance

The extent to which future governments prioritize social protection is uncertain. Political will and commitment are essential for the continuation and expansion of these programs.

Corruption and inefficiencies in administration can undermine the effectiveness of social protection programs, reducing their reach and impact.

Economic factors

The availability of resources for social protection largely depends on Bangladesh's economic performance. Slow growth or economic downturns can limit funding.

The government's ability to allocate sufficient funds relies on effective fiscal policies and revenue collection.

Demographic changes

Rapid population growth may strain the social protection system, making it difficult to provide adequate benefits to all eligible individuals.

An increasing elderly population will require more resources for pensions and healthcare, potentially reducing resources for other programs.

Climate change and environmental risks

Bangladesh is highly vulnerable to floods, cyclones, and droughts, which can disrupt social protection programs and increase demand for emergency assistance.

As the country adapts to climate change, resources may be diverted from social protection. Conversely, the need for these programs may increase.

Technological advancements

While technology can improve the efficiency of social protection delivery, challenges such as digital literacy and access must be addressed to ensure inclusivity.

Effective targeting and monitoring depend on reliable data systems, which require continuous updates and management.

Social dynamics

As more people move to urban areas, social protection programs may need to shift their focus from rural to urban settings, requiring adjustments in design and delivery.

Ensuring that programs are inclusive and address social inequality remains an ongoing challenge, particularly for marginalized groups.

International influences

Fluctuations in international aid can affect the sustainability of social protection programs, particularly those reliant on donor funding.

Global market shifts, trade policies, and economic conditions can indirectly impact the resources available for Bangladesh's social protection system.

Policy and program design

Effective coordination between various sectors and agencies is necessary to ensure that social protection programs provide comprehensive support.

The long-term success of these programs depends on their ability to scale and adapt to changing needs.

Of these factors, political will and economic growth are identified as the most critical uncertainties. Strong governance is crucial for the successful implementation of social protection policies (World Bank, 2023), yet the government's focus can shift from long-term development goals to short-term political gains, especially during election periods.

On the economic front, Bangladesh's structural challenges – including fiscal deficits, a complex exchange rate regime, and a vulnerable banking sector – contribute to slower GDP growth. Without sustained economic growth, the government may struggle to invest effectively in social protection initiatives (World Bank, 2023).

5 Contribution of social protection programs to food system outcomes

Social protection programs are designed to reduce risk and vulnerability by providing basic security and improving access to key services such as healthcare, education, housing, and food. While these programs are essential for addressing acute food crises, they must be tailored to the nature of specific hazards while complementing existing coping strategies. Effective social protection measures go beyond food aid and focus on restoring assets that allow households to participate in markets and protect the most vulnerable, including those unable to work (Cromwell and Slater, 2004).

Food security is achieved when all people have consistent access to safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and preferences (FAO, 2000). It encompasses elements such as caloric intake, food quality, and reliability, as well as cultural preferences. Vulnerability to food insecurity often arises from sudden hazards, when households do not have the necessary assets to cope. These households may experience food insecurity for extended periods if their resources are depleted. During times of crisis, social protection programs aim to mitigate these risks by providing both immediate and **long-term** support and play a critical role in helping people maintain food security.

Image credit: IFAD/ Fahad Kaizer



Social protection programs in Bangladesh contribute to food system outcomes in two key ways: addressing **short-term** food insecurity risks and fostering **long-term** resilience and economic stability.

Short-term interventions focus on providing immediate relief during food crises. Programs such as **cash transfers and public works** help restore household assets and ensure continued access to essential services, including healthcare and education, which are vital for recovery. These measures are critical in managing **acute food insecurity**, by helping households meet immediate food needs while simultaneously laying the foundation for long-term recovery.

Long-term interventions aim to strengthen the livelihoods of vulnerable populations, enabling them to participate in markets and build resilience to future shocks. Programs such as school feeding initiatives, **public works, and cash transfers** work to stabilize incomes and support sustainable economic growth. These efforts address **chronic food insecurity**, focusing on improving food access, utilization, and economic stability over time. They also promote market participation and entitlement protection, complementing existing coping strategies and encouraging long-term development.

Key programs that contribute directly to food system outcomes include:



Cash transfers, which stabilize incomes and enable consumers to afford food, thus encouraging market participation.



Public works programs, which increase food availability, restore assets, and support long-term economic growth.



School feeding programs, which improve food access and utilization for children.



Direct food aid, which provides immediate access to food during crises.



Health and education services, which, while not directly tied to food systems, have long-term effects on food utilization, economic growth, and resilience.

Image credit: IFAD/ Fahad Kaize



6 Potential future scenarios for social protection programs in Bangladesh

Although social protection coverage in Bangladesh has grown, it remains limited compared to requirements. Recent crises – such as COVID-19, volatile international markets, and extreme weather events – have also highlighted the vulnerabilities in social protection systems, leaving the most vulnerable populations at risk in food security due to lack of employment opportunities and income shocks. These challenges, coupled with demographic changes and evolving policy preferences, will shape the future of social protection in Bangladesh.

Addressing evolving challenges and uncertainties requires a flexible, adaptive, responsive, and resilient social protection system. Bangladesh is transitioning to a developing country, which advocates for social security policy support programs such as the NSSS. The effectiveness of the NSSS will hinge on fostering economic growth alongside good governance to curb corruption, address selection bias, and ensure political commitment. Steady economic growth with sound governance is essential for addressing challenges in Bangladesh's social protection programs. Scenario planning, such as the 2x2 matrix (Rhydderch, 2017), can aid policymakers by exploring four potential outcomes based on critical uncertainties: economic growth and governance commitment. Each scenario presents unique implications for key stakeholders—government, beneficiaries, NGOs, international organizations, and the private sector—as illustrated in Figure 1.

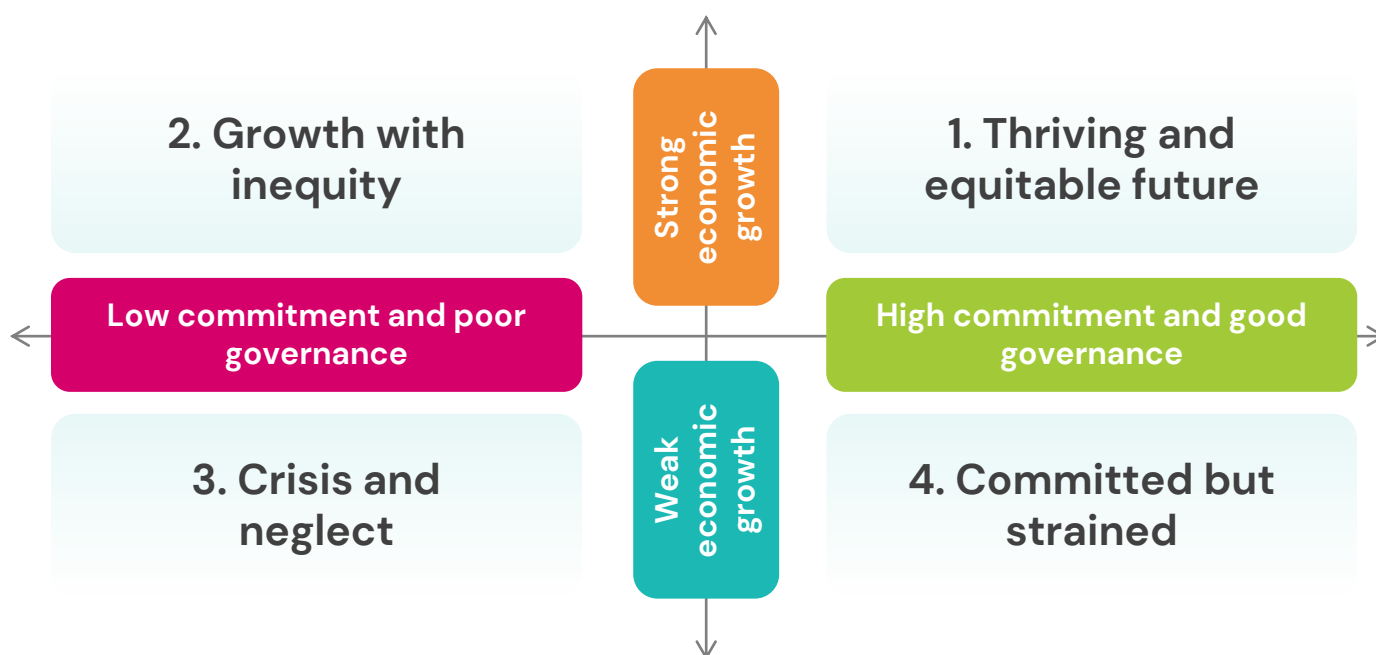


Figure 1: A 2x2 matrix of future scenarios for social protection programs in Bangladesh

Scenario 1: Thriving and equitable future

In this ideal scenario, the government is highly committed to social protection, and the economy is experiencing strong growth. Social protection programs are well-funded and effectively managed, focusing on poverty reduction, food security, and livelihood improvements. Vulnerable populations receive comprehensive support, and the system is resilient to future challenges. Inclusive growth reduces inequality, and the social protection system adapts effectively to changing needs.

Implications:

- **Government:** Gains public trust and stability by successfully implementing comprehensive social protection policies, with sufficient resources for innovation and expansion.
- **Beneficiaries:** Experience improved living conditions, enhanced food security, and increased inclusion in social and economic activities.
- **NGOs/international organizations:** Provide technical and financial support, helping to scale successful interventions and contributing to program innovations.
- **Private sector:** Engages in public-private partnerships and supports social protection through corporate social responsibility, benefiting from a more stable and prosperous society.

Scenario 2: Committed but strained

Here, the government remains committed to social protection, but weak economic growth limits the resources available. While financial constraints slow program expansion, the government focuses on making the best use of limited funds. Innovations and partnerships with international organizations help maintain critical support for the most vulnerable, but overall impact remains constrained by the economic situation.

Implications:

- **Government:** Must prioritize and allocate resources efficiently, focusing on cost-effective, targeted interventions. Partnerships with NGOs and international organizations become critical.
- **Beneficiaries:** Receive support focused on addressing the most urgent needs, but overall coverage is limited due to resource constraints.
- **NGOs/international organizations:** Play a crucial role in supplementing government efforts by providing additional resources and advocating for innovative financing solutions.
- **Private sector:** Has opportunities to contribute to social protection efforts through targeted corporate social responsibility initiatives.

Scenario 3: Growth with inequity

In this scenario, Bangladesh experiences strong economic growth, but weak governance and low political commitment hinder the effectiveness of social protection programs. Corruption and mismanagement disrupt delivery, preventing program benefits from reaching the most vulnerable. Despite financial resources being available, the lack of political will and governance capacity leads to increasing inequality and social unrest.

Implications:

- **Government:** Struggles with governance and transparency issues, leading to a loss of public trust and reduced international support.
- **Beneficiaries:** Face inconsistent support, with many falling through the cracks as program implementation is hindered by corruption and inefficiencies.
- **NGOs/international organizations:** Focus on ensuring accountability and transparency, advocating for governance reforms to improve program effectiveness.
- **Private sector:** Hesitates to engage due to concerns about governance and stability, viewing the situation as a risk to business operations.

Scenario 4: Crisis and neglect

This worst-case scenario combines weak governance and poor economic growth. Social protection programs are underfunded and poorly managed, leaving vulnerable populations with minimal support. The system is unable to cope with economic, social, and environmental shocks, resulting in worsening poverty, food insecurity, and social instability. Inequality rises, and the social protection system teeters on the brink of collapse.

Implications:

- **Government:** Faces severe economic and governance challenges, losing legitimacy as social unrest increases.
- **Beneficiaries:** Suffer from minimal support, increased poverty, and higher food insecurity, with growing inequality and instability.
- **NGOs/international organizations:** Step in to provide emergency relief and crisis management, advocating for urgent policy reforms and international support.
- **Private sector:** Faces an unstable environment, so reduces investments and operations as the economy deteriorates.



Image credit: IFAD/GMB Akash

9 Policy recommendations

Bangladesh has demonstrated a strong commitment to social protection since its independence, expanding efforts to address poverty, healthcare, education, and employment. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and global challenges have emphasized the need for more responsive systems that integrate food security, disaster risk reduction, and climate adaptation.

To ensure the continued effectiveness and sustainability of social protection programs, the following policy actions are recommended:

- **Strengthening program design and governance:** Streamline coordination among ministries to reduce administrative inefficiencies. Invest in capacity building for government agencies and partner organizations to ensure smooth program implementation. Enhance monitoring mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability in resource distribution.
- **Enhancing inclusivity and accessibility:** Prioritize reaching marginalized populations, including rural women and indigenous communities, through targeted outreach and simplified application processes. Develop mobile and community-based service centers to bridge geographic and digital divides.
- **Aligning with food system objectives:** Expand programs that directly address food security, such as school feeding initiatives and agricultural subsidies. Introduce integrated strategies combining social protection with climate adaptation measures to strengthen household resilience.
- **Innovating for efficiency:** Utilize digital platforms and data analytics to improve beneficiary targeting and reduce errors in resource allocation. Pilot and scale innovative approaches such as mobile cash transfers and smart vouchers linked to food markets.
- **Securing sustainable financing:** Diversify funding sources by increasing national budget allocations and fostering public-private partnerships. Establish a contingency fund for emergency responses to climate-related or economic shocks.
- **Emphasizing resilience and long-term impact:** Connect short-term relief measures with capacity-building initiatives that enable households to rebuild assets and sustain livelihoods. Integrate social protection with broader food system strategies, ensuring alignment with national development plans and global goals.

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